

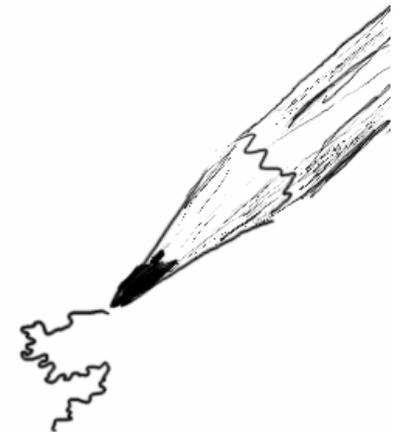
# STORYTELLING in the online medium

**Raph Koster**

**Creative Director, Sony Online Entertainment**

**Rich Vogel**

**Director of Development, Sony Online Entertainment**



# The Premise

- **Start with a broad definition of "story"**

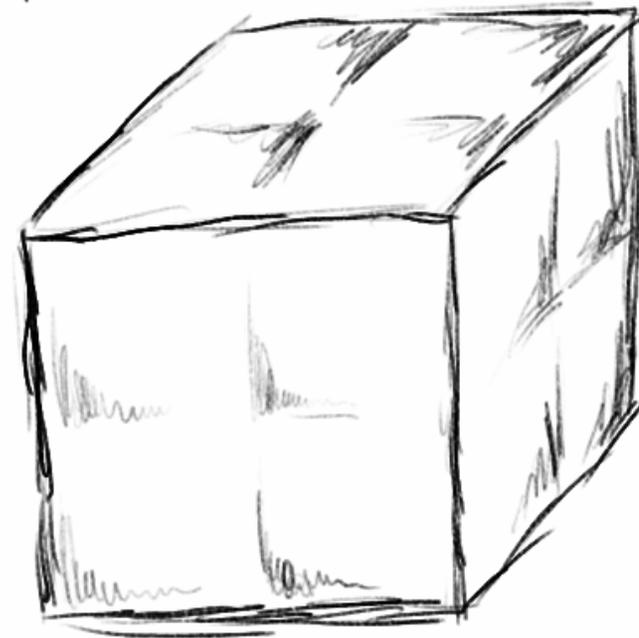
THE STORYTELLING CUBE

*Events experienced as  
narratives by  
players...*

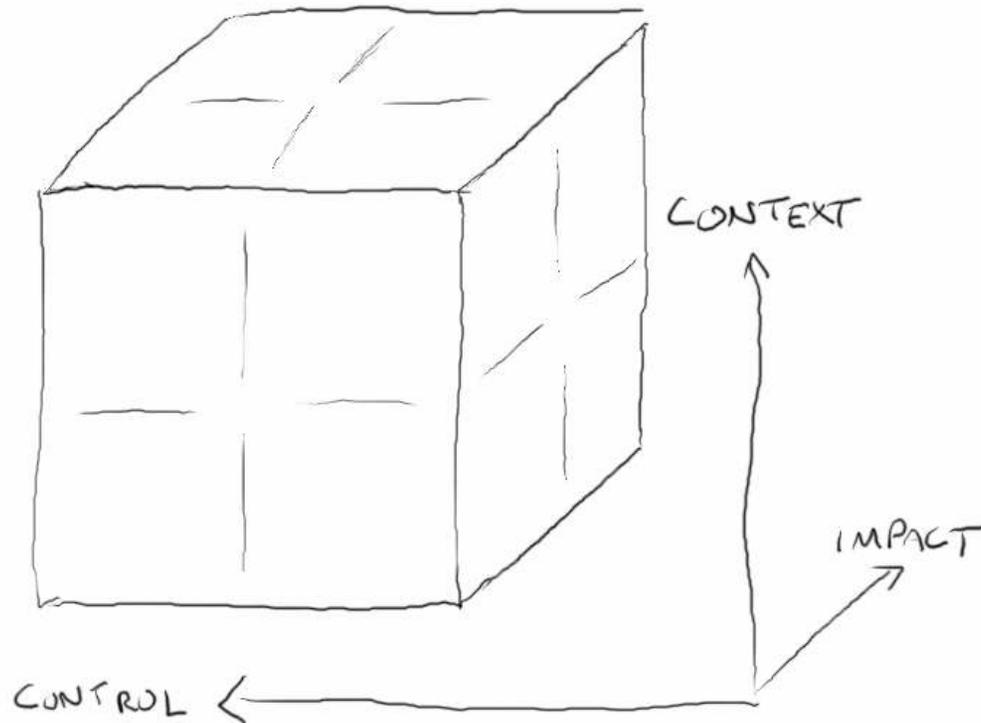
*...experientially*

*...by filling in gaps*

*...retroactively*



# The Premise



- **Classify fictional elements and online stories based on three criteria**
  - We'll end up with eight storytelling forms
- **Identify techniques used in each**
  - Then you can go home and use them

# Axis One: Who's telling the story?

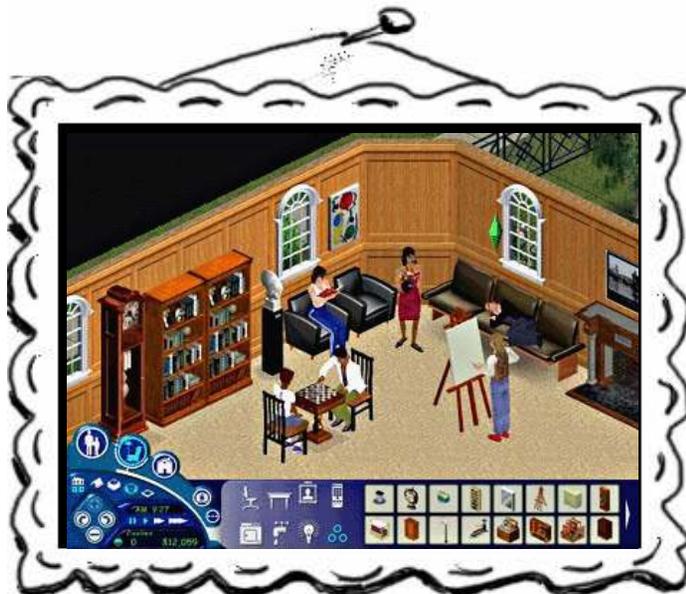
## *Choice One*

The story is driven by the designers or the Live team



## *Choice Two*

Story arises from the player's actions as they play the game



# Axis Two: Is the story element in context?

## *Choice One*

**Of course it is. We've gone to great lengths to craft a fictionally coherent experience.**



## *Choice Two*

**No, it arises more out of real-world events than out of the game fiction.**

# Axis Three: Does it alter the world?

## *Choice One*

**It's ephemeral: may have a big impact but no lasting effect**



## *Choice Two*

**The events in the story have permanent effect on the world state**

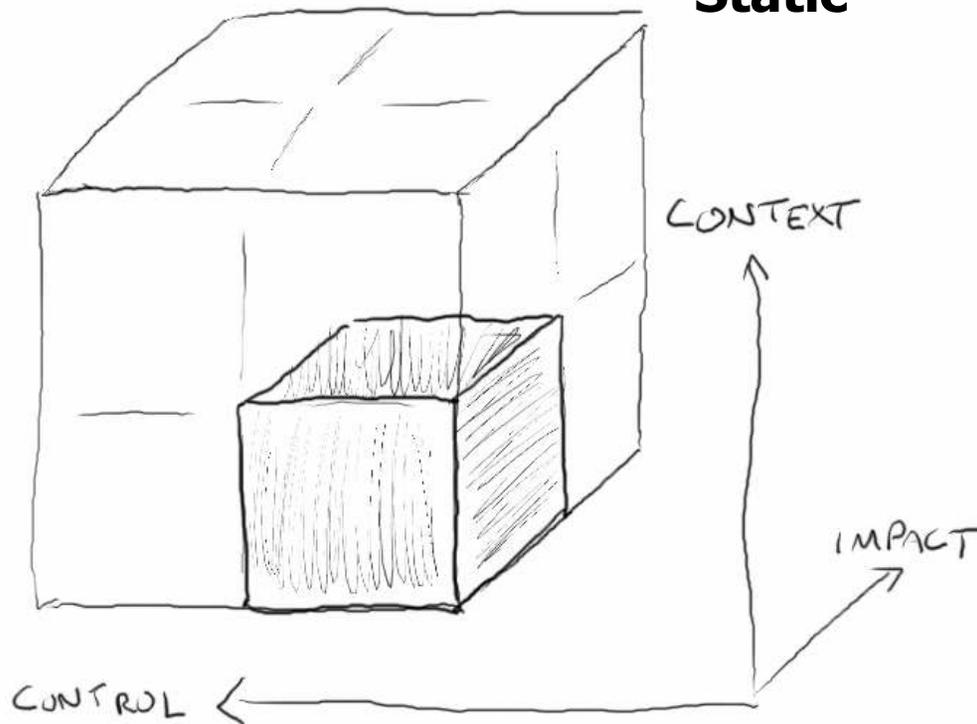
## Box One

**Design-directed  
Contextual  
Static**

**These are static  
scenarios built into  
the map**

**Provided when the  
game begins, never  
change**

**This is the default  
state of the art**

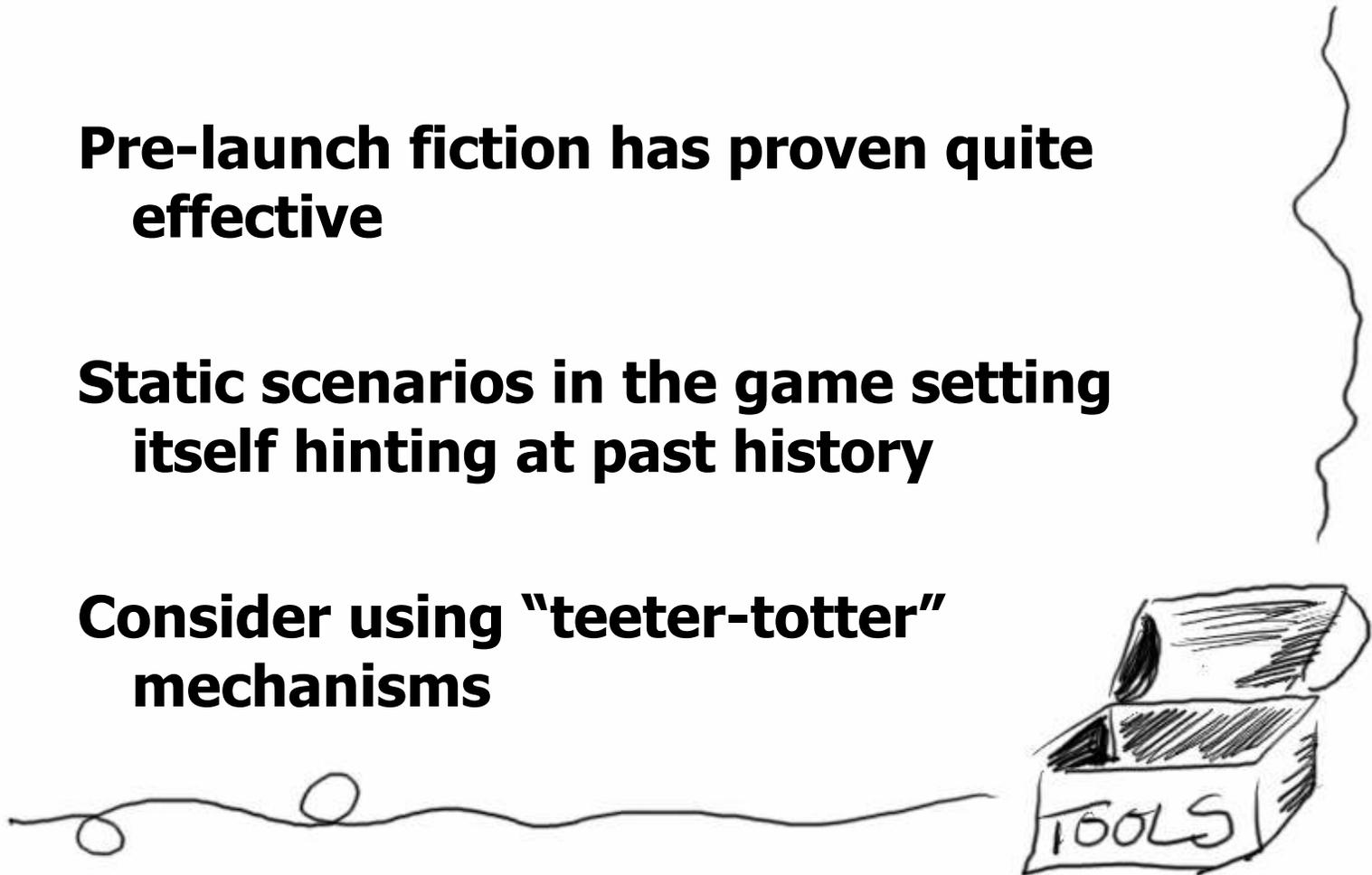


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**Pre-launch fiction has proven quite effective**

**Static scenarios in the game setting itself hinting at past history**

**Consider using "teeter-totter" mechanisms**



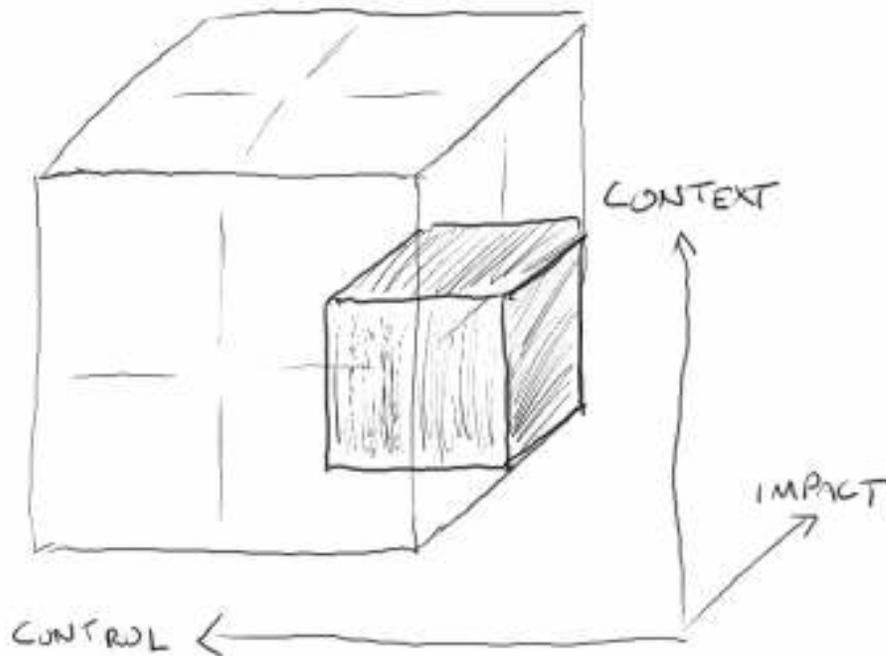
# MAJESTIC

- **The game is all backstory**
- **Originally intended to be delivered episodically**
- **Players reveal aspects of backstory by working together**
- **Not reactive to player actions, but pretends to be**
- **Contrast to the AI web game—why differing success?**

# Box Two

**Design directed**  
**Backplotted**  
**Dynamic**

**What players mean**  
**when they say**  
**“world-changing**  
**events”**



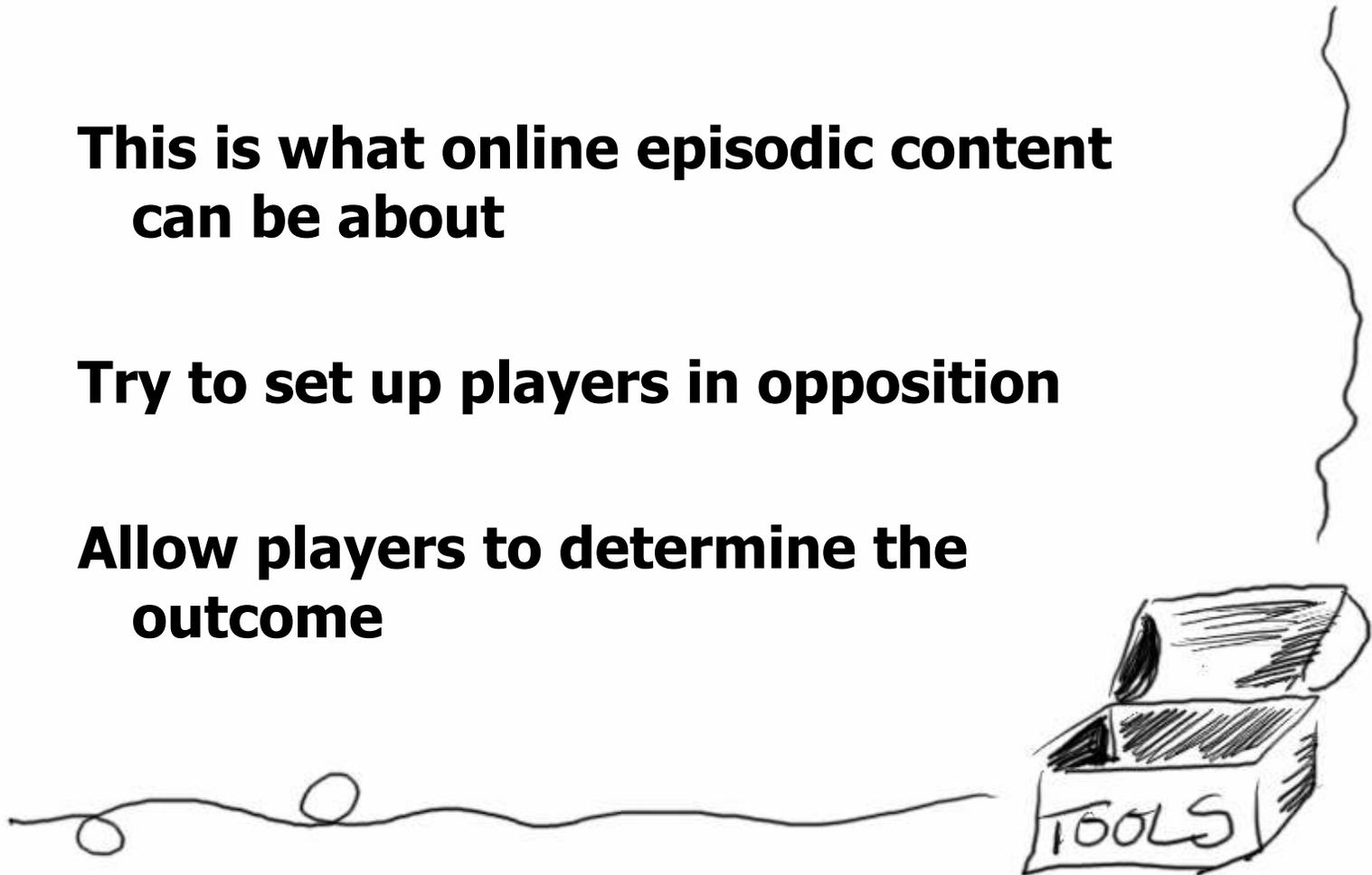
**Destroying towns,**  
**changing the map,**  
**toppling NPC leaders**

**Allow players to**  
**determine the**  
**outcome if you can**

**This is what online episodic content  
can be about**

**Try to set up players in opposition**

**Allow players to determine the  
outcome**



# ASHERON'S CALL

- **Monthly patch cycle is also episodic story delivery**
- **Technology allows massive terrain modification**
- **End of beta: they blew a city up**
- **"Trickle-down" technique**
- **Players co-opted an event and almost changed the ending**

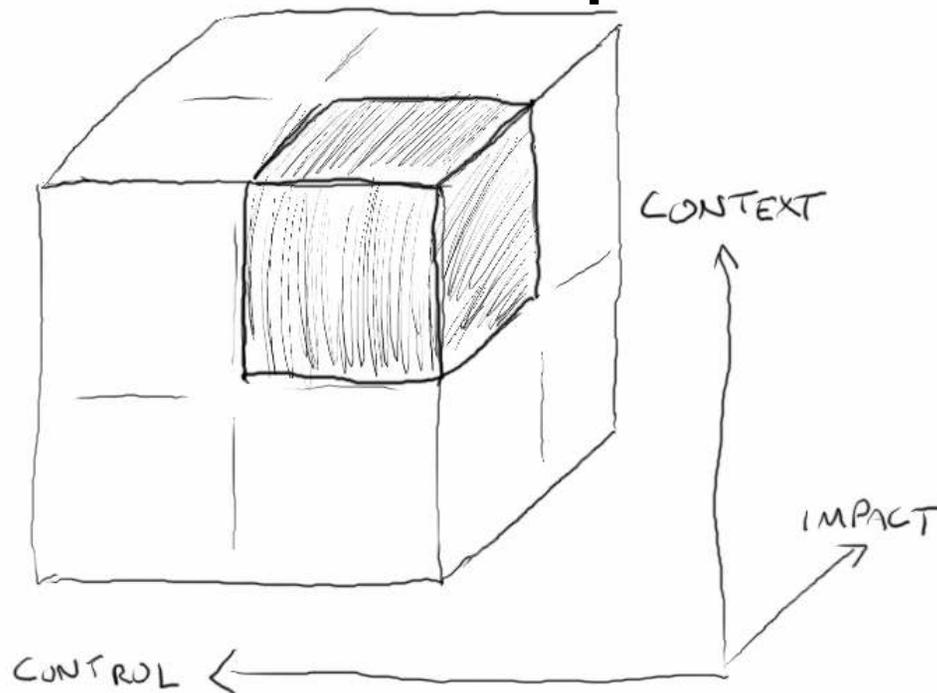
# Box Three

**Design directed**  
**Extra-fictional**  
**Ephemeral**

**In-game holidays**

**Recognition of real-  
world events**

**May be woven into  
game fiction to an  
extent, but you're  
not fooling anyone**

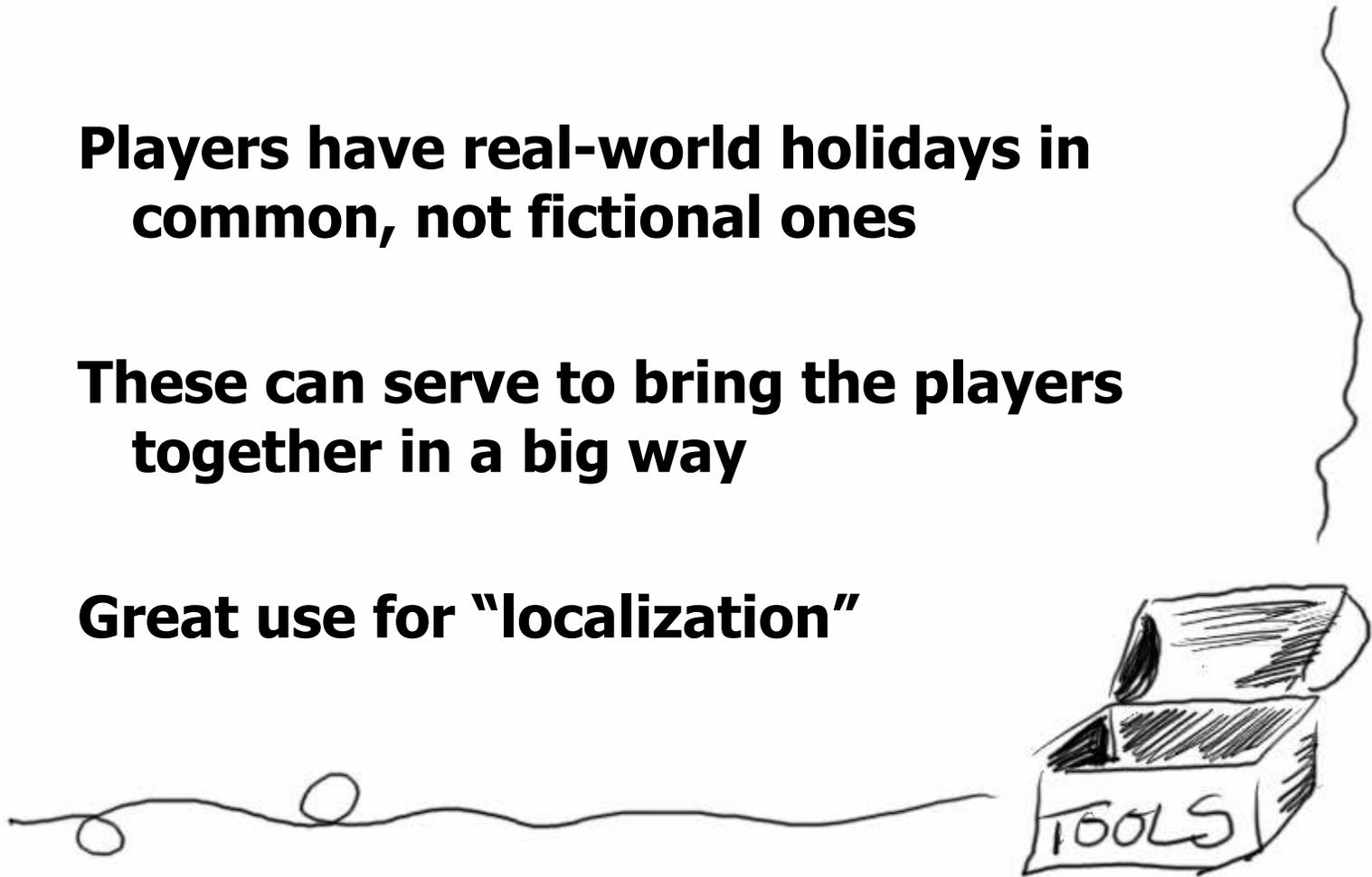


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**Players have real-world holidays in  
common, not fictional ones**

**These can serve to bring the players  
together in a big way**

**Great use for “localization”**





ULTIMA  
ONLINE

- 
- **Has run holiday events most years (sometimes they ran amok)**
  - **Cherry blossom festival in Japan proved to be a major PR coup**
  - **Flexibility in game's design allowed players to run with the ball**

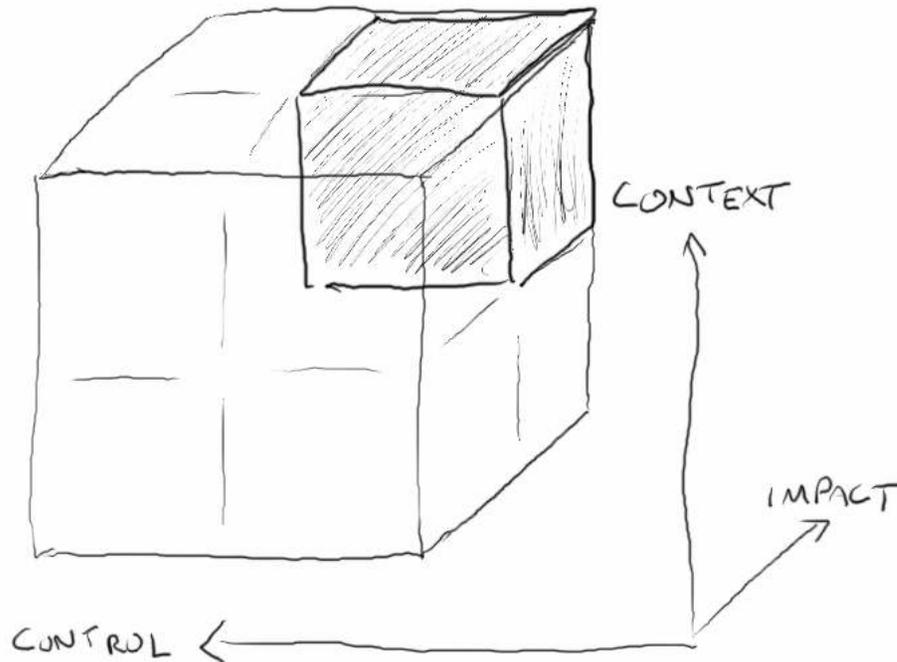
# Box Four

**Design directed  
Out of character  
Change the world**

**Weaving game  
changes into the  
storyline**

**New types of items or  
features**

**May have ripple effects  
on fiction**

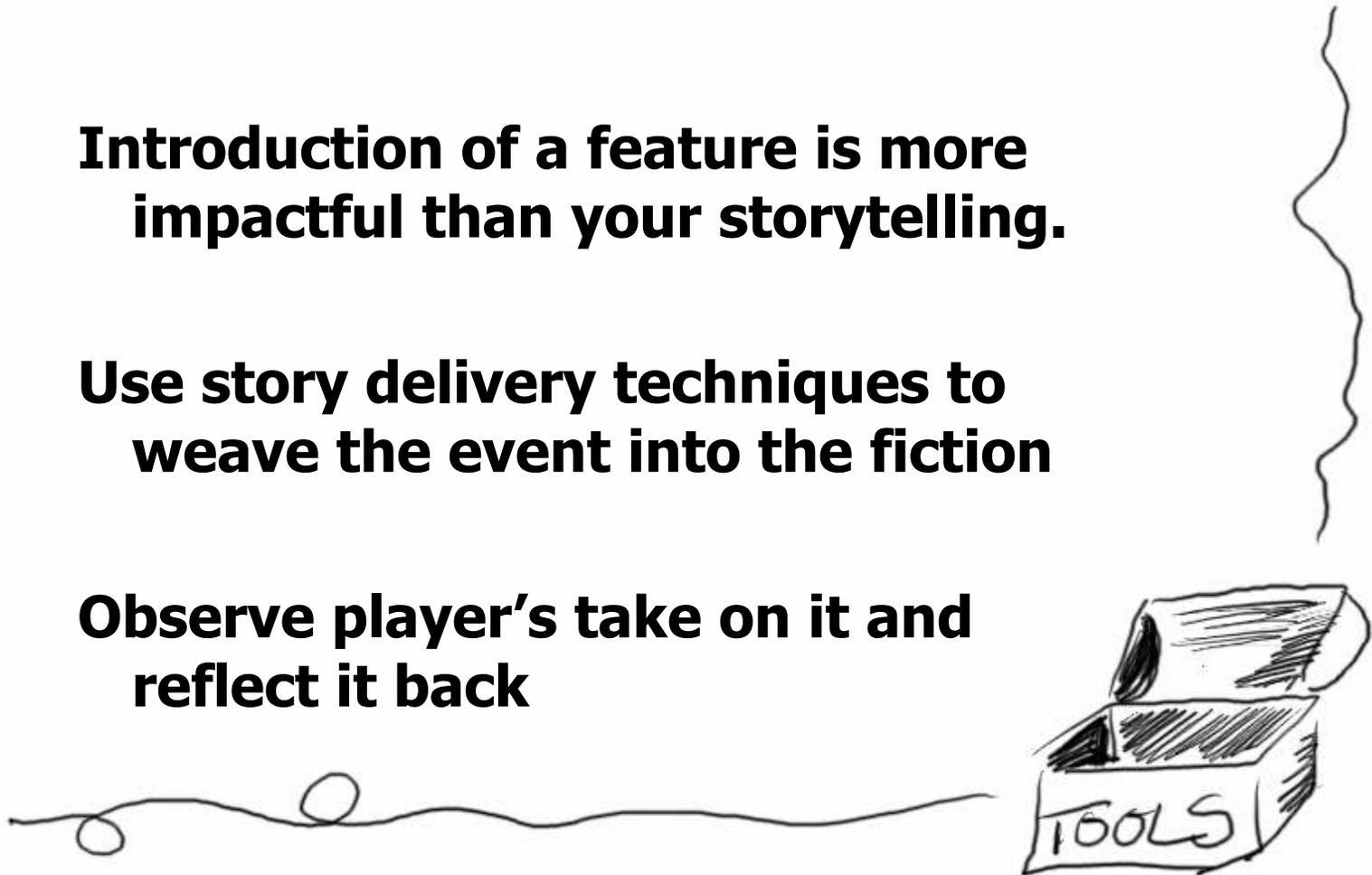


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**Introduction of a feature is more impactful than your storytelling.**

**Use story delivery techniques to weave the event into the fiction**

**Observe player's take on it and reflect it back**



# Achaea

Dreams of Divine Lands

- **In-context narratives only**
- **No overarching backplot**
- **Carefully plan introduction of new material:**
  - **Losing an admin**
  - **Introducing a new zone**
  - **Adding a new class**
- **All admins significantly empowered and act nimbly**

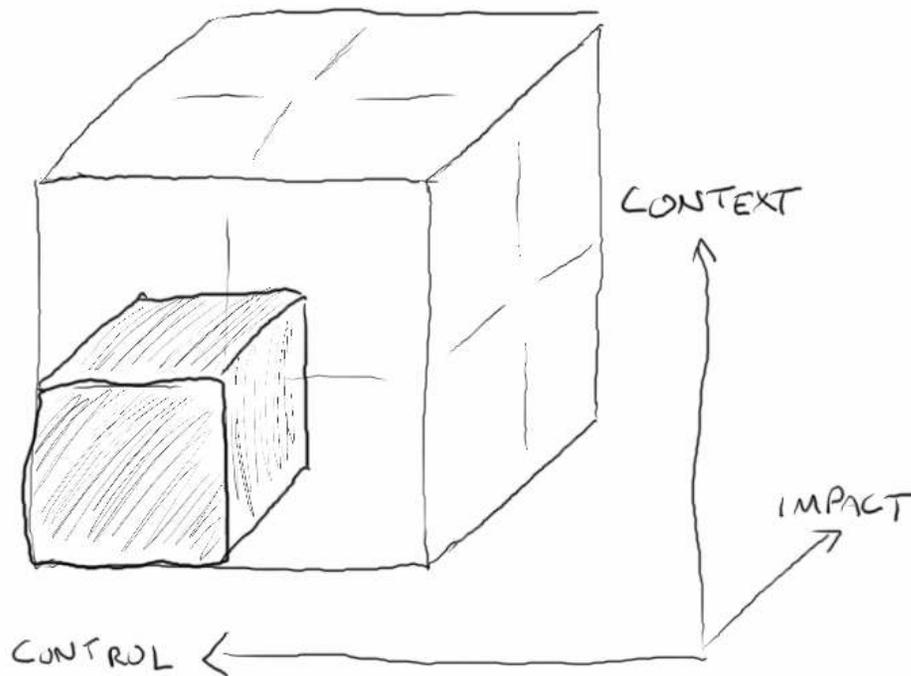
# Box Five

**Player-directed**  
**From the backplot**  
**Static**

**Players roleplay their**  
**own in-context**  
**story, in parallel to**  
**your own**

**It has no wider impact**  
**on the world**

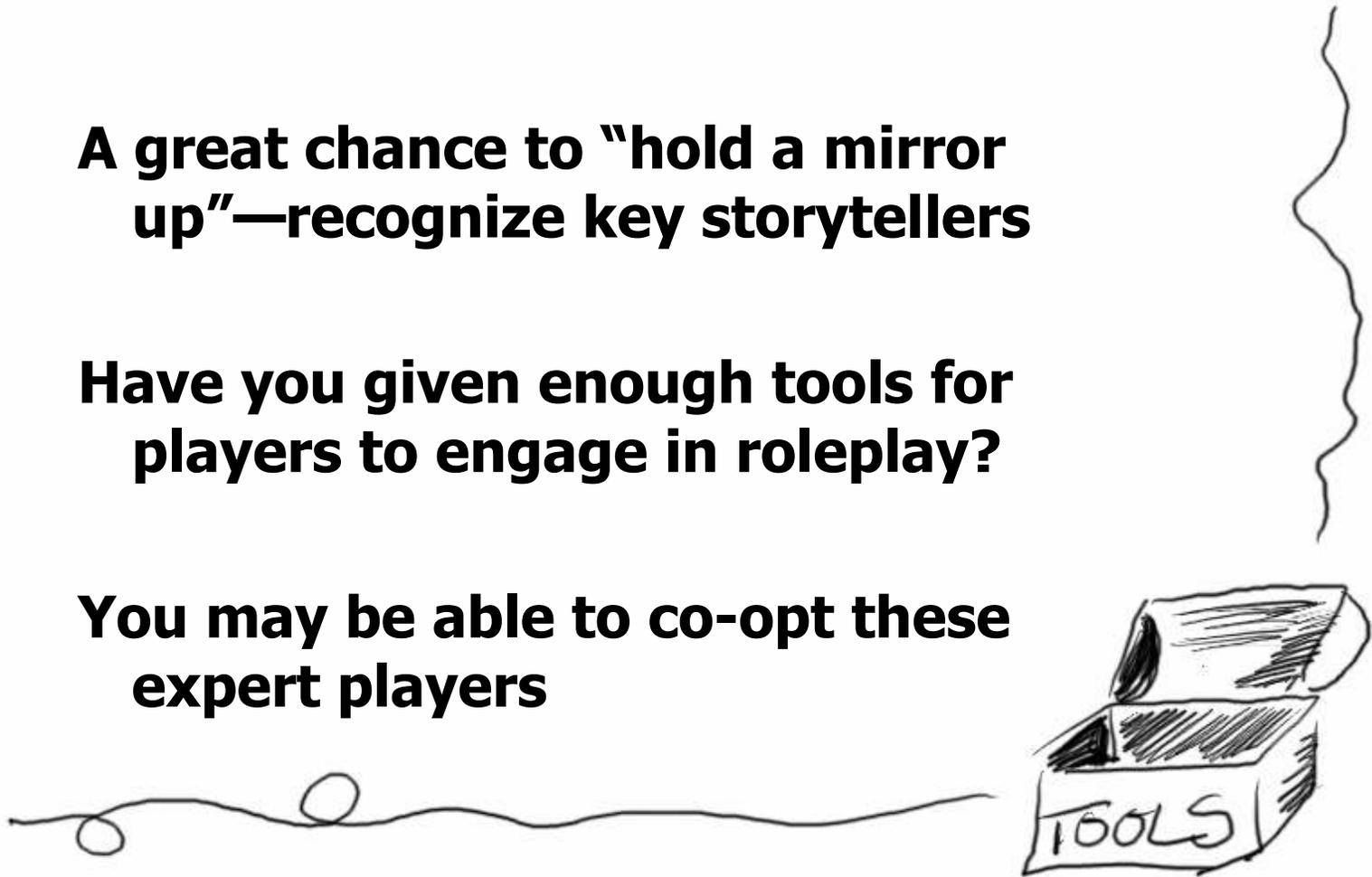
**This is what most role-**  
**playing is**



**A great chance to “hold a mirror  
up”—recognize key storytellers**

**Have you given enough tools for  
players to engage in roleplay?**

**You may be able to co-opt these  
expert players**



# EVERQUEST

- **Mostly static, combat-oriented**
- **Players work around the nature of the game (there are no real "rp" mechanics in the game)**
- **Extensive fan fiction community**
- **Generic high fantasy setting helps players**
- **Strict roles also helps players**

# Box Six

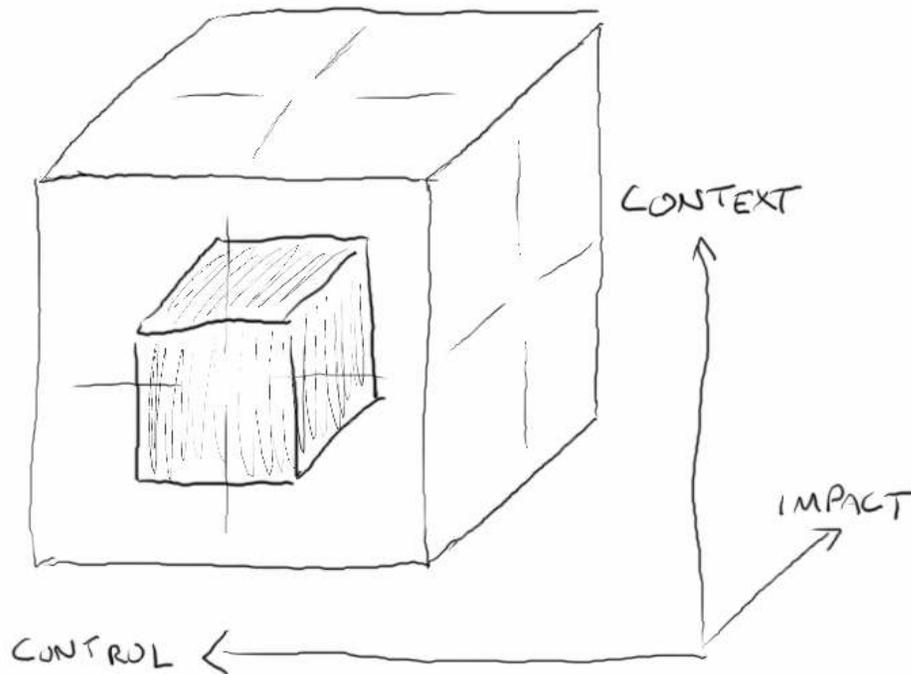
**Player-directed**  
**From backplot**  
**Does affect the world**

**Players topple the  
king!**

**Players reshape the  
continents!**

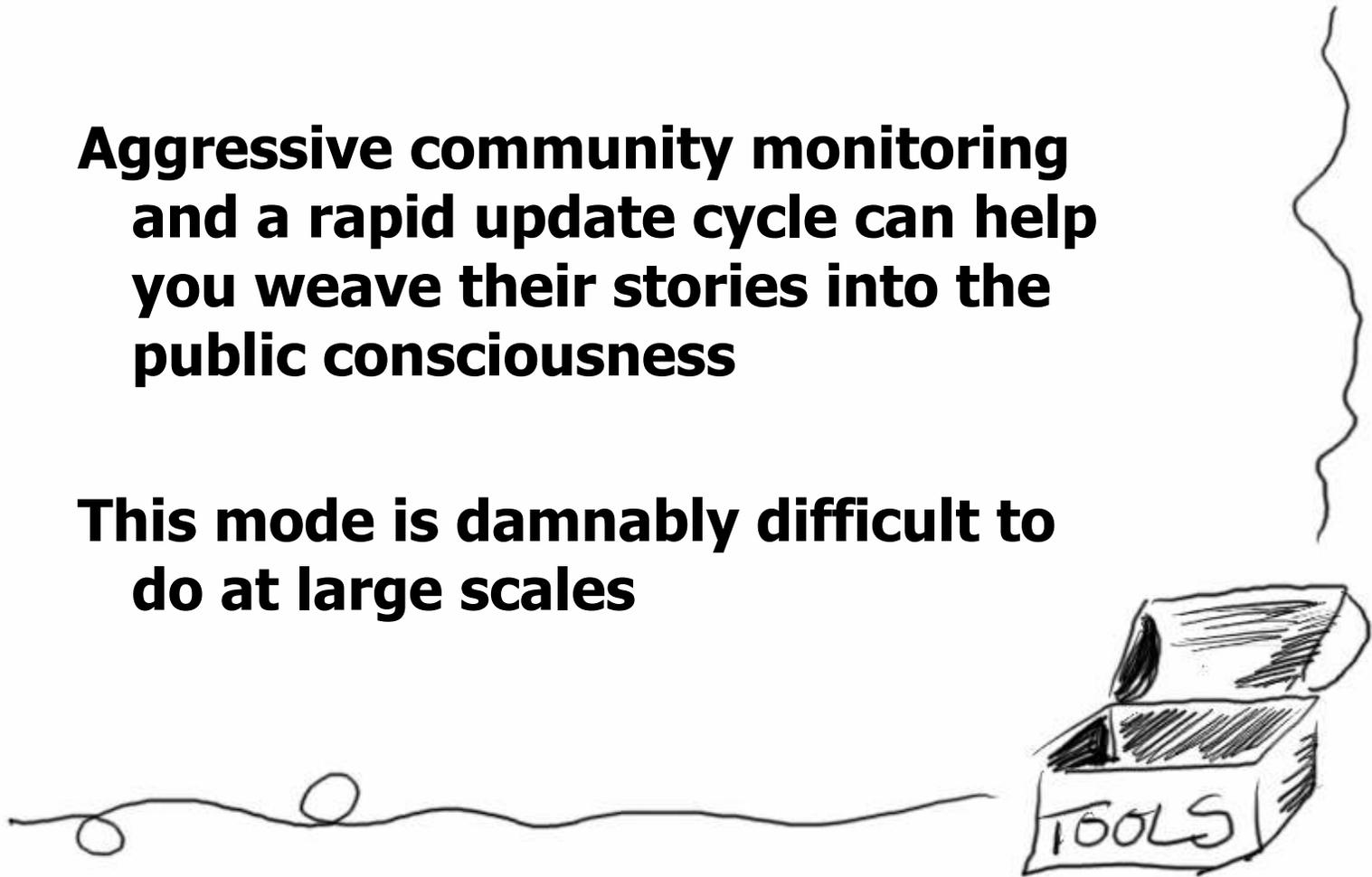
**Somehow it all fits into  
the plot!**

**This is what players  
say they want.**



**Aggressive community monitoring  
and a rapid update cycle can help  
you weave their stories into the  
public consciousness**

**This mode is damnably difficult to  
do at large scales**



# Castle Barrack

- An “onion” approach to content introduction
- Extensive backstory, key characters in admin hands to set the tone
- Players eventually assume these roles (“VPs” or veteran players)...
- ...then move up to be StoryPlotters (designers!) in charge of content/story arc—who get royalties!

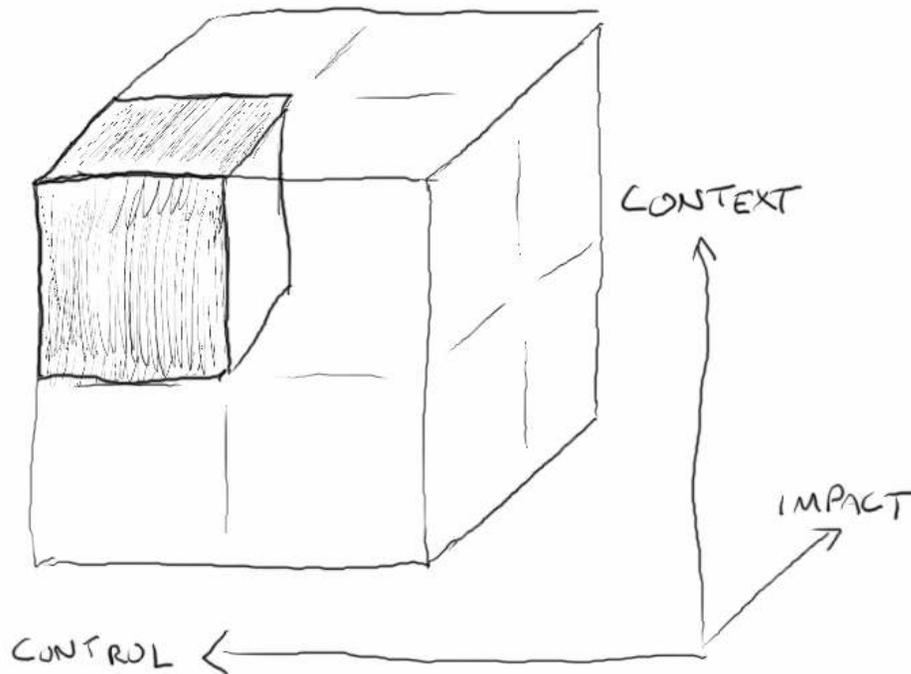
# Box Seven

**Player directed**  
**Out of context**  
**Ephemeral**

**The default player**  
**activity**

**Everyday**  
**mythologizing**

**Player journals,**  
**dungeons crawls,**  
**roleplay taverns**

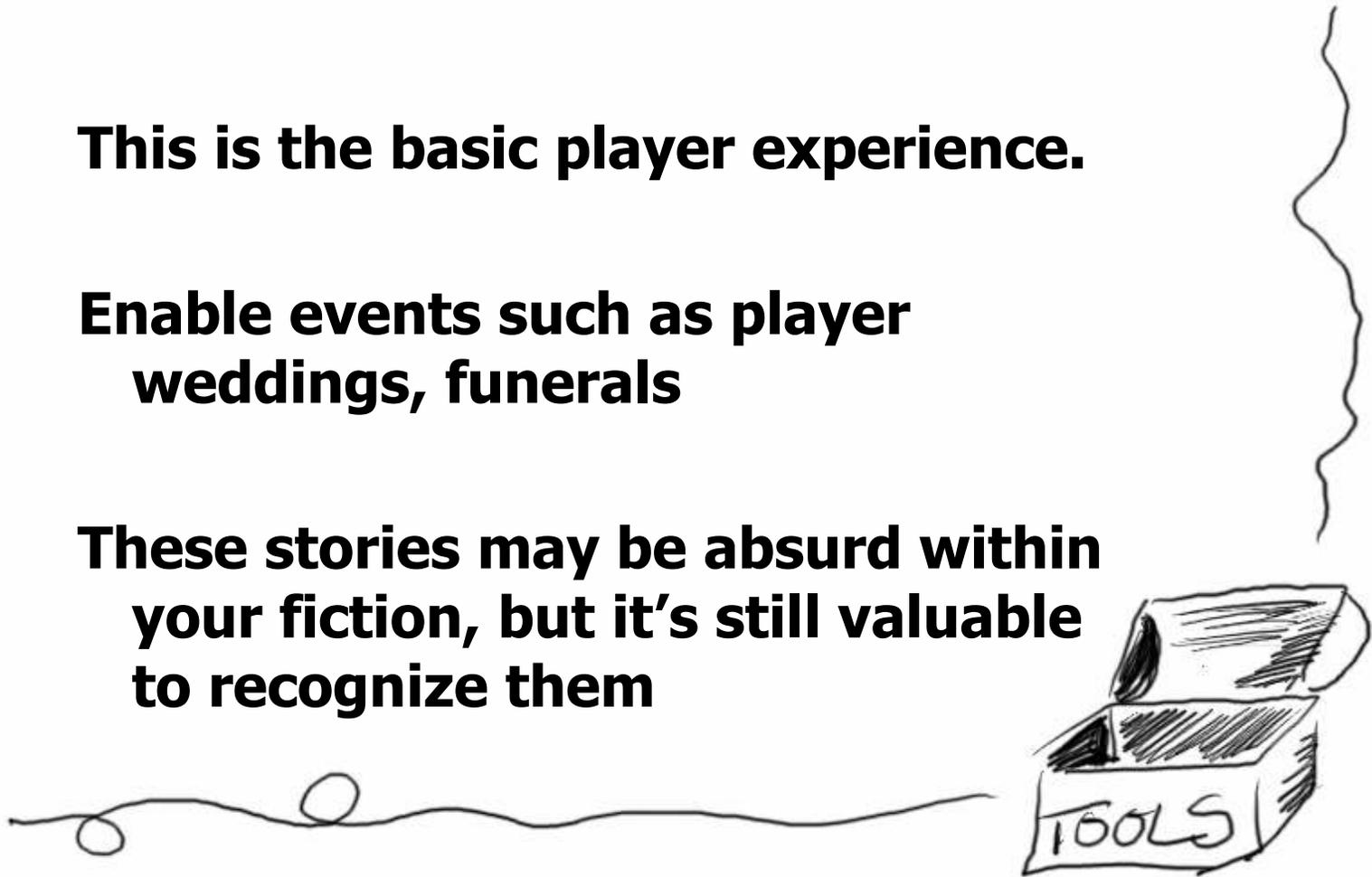


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**This is the basic player experience.**

**Enable events such as player  
weddings, funerals**

**These stories may be absurd within  
your fiction, but it's still valuable  
to recognize them**



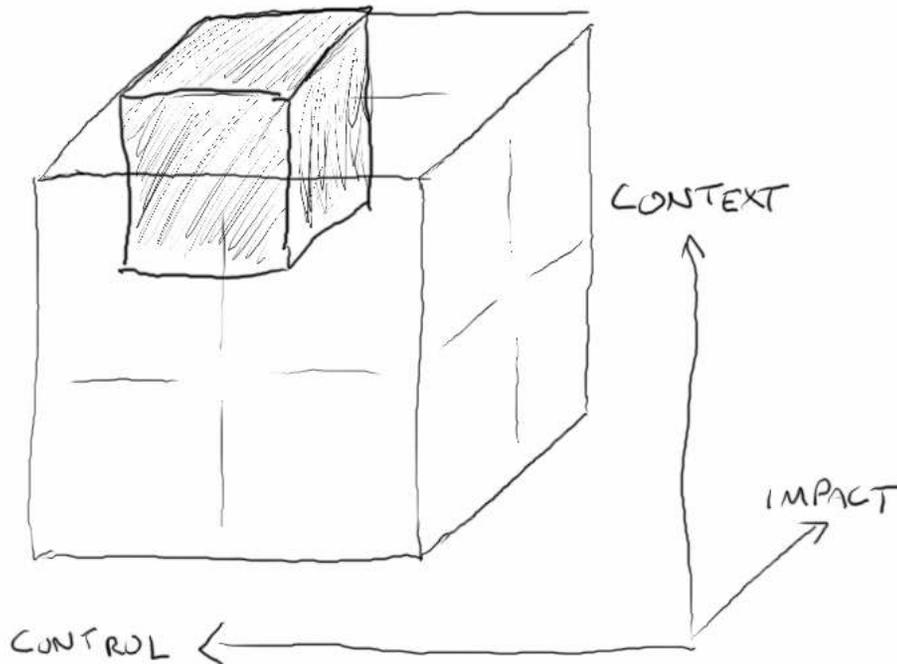
# Game Developers Conference



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# Box Eight

**Player directed**  
**Out of context**  
**Affects the world**



**The genre's long-term  
future**

**Players get their own  
king to overthrow  
Lord British**

**Player cities more  
important than  
design-built ones**

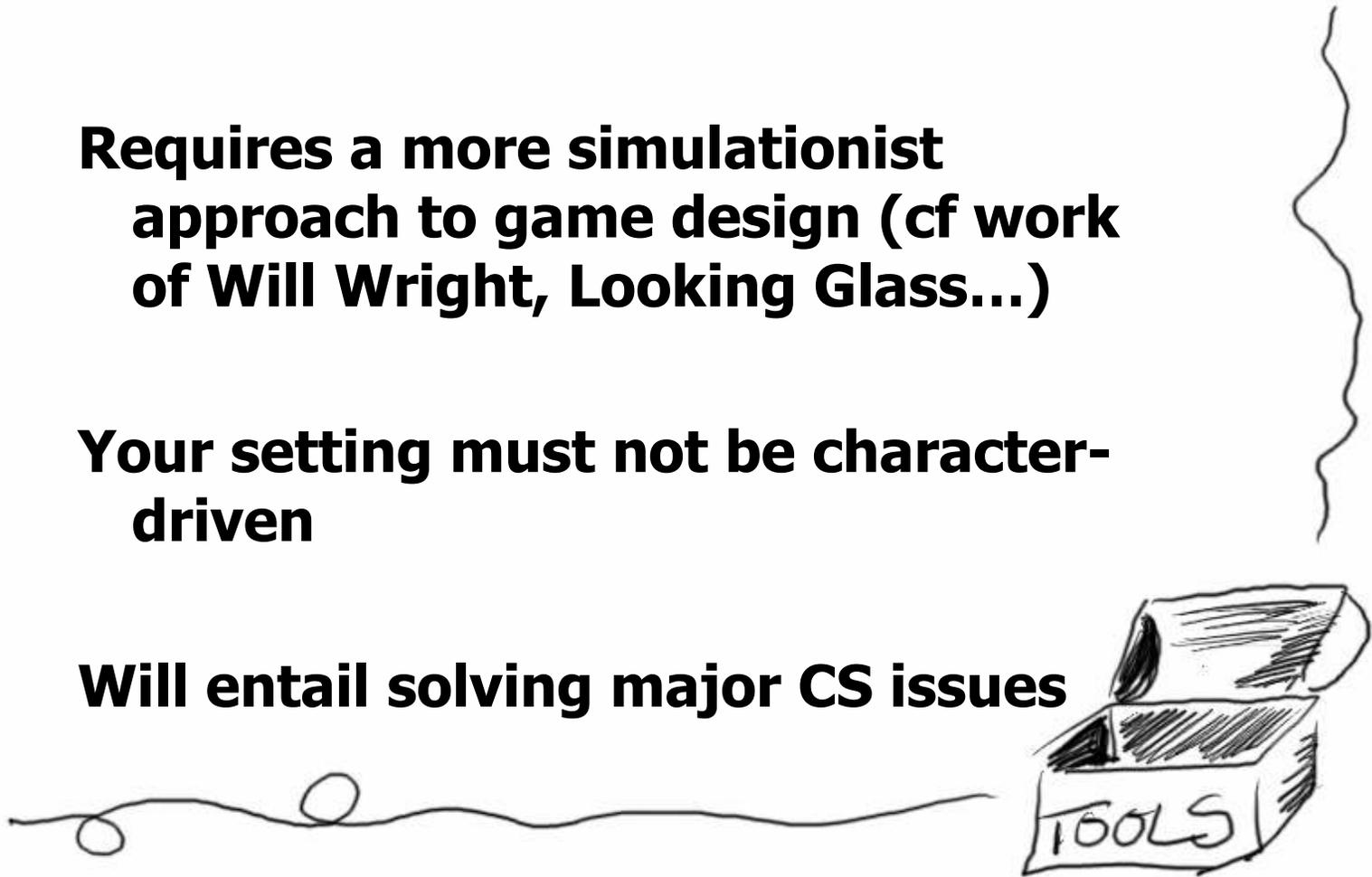
**They permanently  
reshape the  
environment**

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**Requires a more simulationist  
approach to game design (cf work  
of Will Wright, Looking Glass...)**

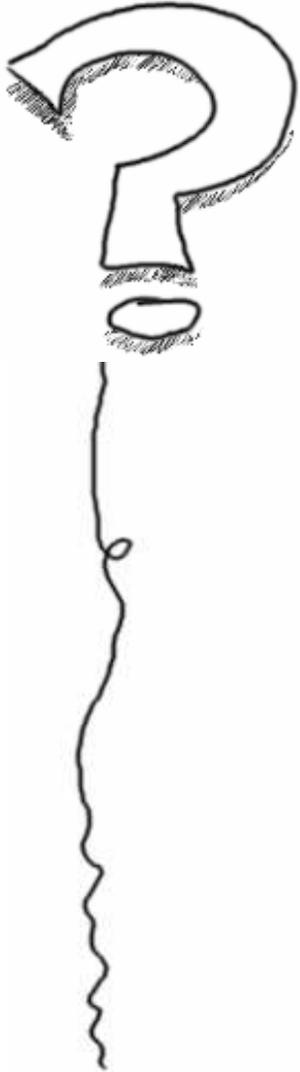
**Your setting must not be character-  
driven**

**Will entail solving major CS issues**



# Lineage

- **Static “castles” are placed on the map**
- **Players form large-scale alliances to capture them**
- **Control of these points affects taxes, shops, etc**
- **Why not greater success in American market?**
- **Still only goes part of the way**



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## What puts the pieces together?

**Asheron's Call 2?**

**Atriarch?**

**Shadowbane?**

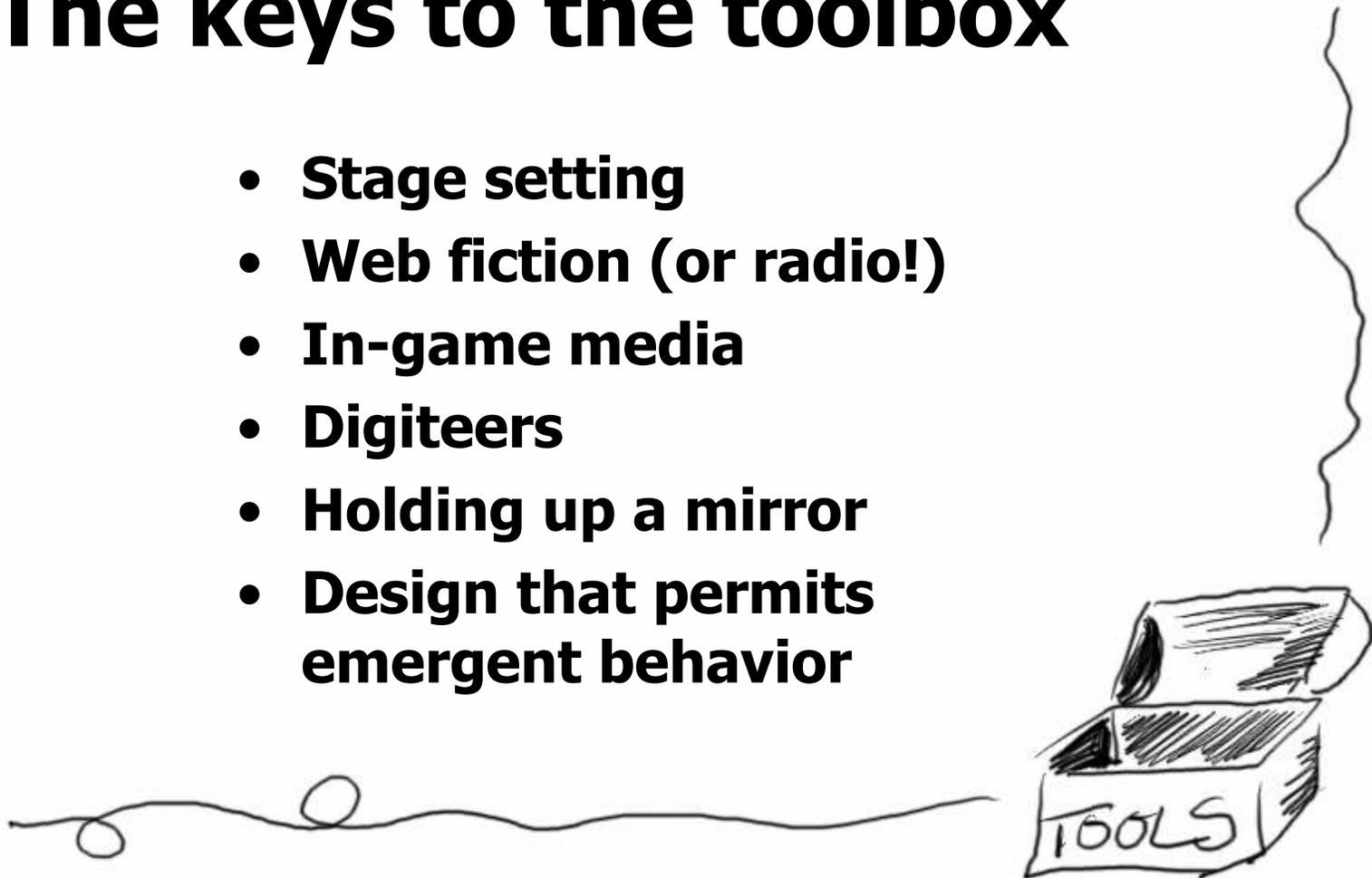
**The Sims Online?**

**Star Wars Galaxies?**

**Tabula Rasa?**

# The keys to the toolbox

- **Stage setting**
- **Web fiction (or radio!)**
- **In-game media**
- **Digiteers**
- **Holding up a mirror**
- **Design that permits emergent behavior**

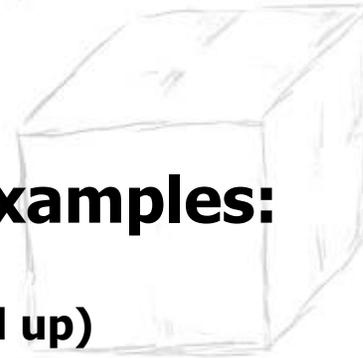


# Notes

## Good background fiction examples:

Ultima Worlds Online: Origin  
Anarchy Online  
Asheron's Call

THE STORYTELLING CUBE



## Good serial fiction delivery examples:

Asheron's Call  
Ultima Online (check out BNN, if it's still up)

## Good "players control the world" mechanics:

Lineage  
World War II Online



## Special thanks to:

Christopher Allen and Shannon Appelcline of Skotos  
Matt Mihaly of Achaea

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# Notes

## Case study games

Achaea: <http://www.achaea.com>

Asheron's Call: <http://www.microsoft.com/games/ac/>

Castle Marrach: <http://www.skotos.net>

EverQuest: <http://www.everquest.com>

Lineage: <http://www.lineage-us.com>

Majestic:

[http://www.ea.com/worlds/games/pw\\_majstc00/hatted\\_jump\\_page.jsp](http://www.ea.com/worlds/games/pw_majstc00/hatted_jump_page.jsp)

Ultima Online: <http://www.uo.com>

Raph's Website:

<http://www.legendmud.org/raph/gaming/>